

The Reign of Christ

Luke 23:32-43

November 20, 2022

I first want to assure you that I know what day it is. The time change a couple of weeks ago did not propel me back into last April. I know that we just had Halloween. I know that Thanksgiving is this week and that we're on the cusp of Advent.

I know that today is Sunday, November 20th. But it's a fair question: *If she knows that it's fall, and that we are not in the midst of Holy Week, that today is not Good Friday, then why are we reading the story of the crucifixion? Isn't this just a little out of place with the pumpkins and the fall leaves?*

I'll confess that I had the exact same wondering when I first read our text for today. It's a passage that was given to us by the church calendar for this day in particular, for "Reign of Christ" or "Christ the King" Sunday.

If you didn't know that we have a church calendar (and I don't just mean Second Presbyterian Church; I mean the church around the world), you might be interested to know that today is the final Sunday of the church year. It's the "New Year's Eve" of the annual cycle that we live together in the church each year.

I'll be honest: I didn't even really begin to understand this idea of the church calendar or the church year until I was a seminary student. Of course, I knew that Christmas and Easter came around every year, but I didn't really understand that they were positioned within a larger story, a wider rhythm, that was intentional and purposeful.

In the church, the start of the new year isn't January 1st—it's the first Sunday in Advent (that will be next Sunday). This first Sunday in Advent is where we begin again each year. We start back

at the beginning. We wait in darkness for the light of Christ's birth. We celebrate Christ's birth on Christmas. We follow his light to Epiphany. We remember his baptism and the stories of his life and ministry, his miracles, his healings, his teachings. And eventually we come to the season of Lent, a time of preparation for the events of Holy Week, Jesus' death on the cross. We relive the tragedy and the hopelessness of that dark day, and then three days later we celebrate the impossible victory of the empty tomb, Christ's resurrection, God's ultimate defeat over sin and death and all forces of evil in this world. And then after Easter, we continue to celebrate the risen Christ, his Ascension to heaven. On Pentecost, we remember the gift of the Holy Spirit, the birthday of the church, and we march our way through these festivals and these feast days, rehearsing the story of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. And this is where it all leads, Reign of Christ Sunday, today, when we proclaim that in this grand and great drama of God's saving love, this is how it all ends: Christ reigns. Jesus is king. Over all and above all and through all. The end.

And then next Sunday, we'll start back at the beginning. We do this, year after year, as a way of rehearsing, performing, proclaiming, living the story, with gratitude for God's faithfulness and with anticipation for the day when Christ will come again. And God's kingdom will come in its glory and in its fullness.

Now maybe this is new to you, or maybe it's not, but here's why it matters: If the end of the story—the grand cosmic story of all of history and creation—if the end of this story is that Christ reigns, that Christ is King, then we have to ask, "Just what kind of reign or kingdom is this? What kind of king is he?"

And this is where the reading given to us by the church calendar begins to start to make sense for today. It takes all of our assumptions and beliefs and preconceived notions about power and strength and turns them upside down.

We see a king who endures brutal pain and mockery and responds not with violence or revenge, but with forgiveness. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." A radical forgiveness that wasn't even asked for but nevertheless flows from the heart of the Savior.

We see a king, we see a Jesus, who, rather than save himself, stays true to his mission, continuing to identify himself with humanity even though that road leads to death. In his compassion, Jesus "suffers with" humanity in this way. His fate is bound up with ours for all time, and he suffers and dies alongside two criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

And in a final and surprising and tender moment with one of these criminals, someone who has been condemned by the society and justice system of his time, this man implores Jesus, "Remember me when you come in your kingdom." And Jesus offers hope to one who had been given no further chances, to one who had been condemned to death. "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." He shows mercy to one whom everyone else has condemned.

On this "Reign of Christ" Sunday, we encounter a ruler unlike any other: Forgiving in the midst of insult and injury. Powerful beyond measure, and yet faithful to his mission. Giving of himself out of compassion and love for all of God's children, for all of us. Showing mercy to one who by all accounts did not deserve it. This is a strange kind of king.

Now, there is so much that could be said here, but I want to confess that there is one part of this passage that really bothered me this week. I couldn't get around it. It was there in the back of my mind. I couldn't make sense of it. This narrative of the crucifixion seems to flow distinctly in one direction. Jesus is mocked, scorned, derided by all the different individuals and groups of people around him. "This is

the King of the Jews" the inscription above his head reads, intended to be a cruel jeer. And then, *against* this current of taunts and torture we find standing the second criminal, the one who implores, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." I couldn't shake the feeling that this request felt so out of place. The circumstances of what is happening in the moment don't seem to indicate that Jesus had any sort of power or kingdom of which to speak. It would have made more sense for this man to join in on the verbal abuse, or even just to remain silent.

So, how do we explain this? Is he somehow, unlike everyone else, able to see Jesus for who he is? How? Why?

As I was preparing this sermon, I sat and sat and couldn't get around this, couldn't make sense of it, couldn't explain it. And then I realized that maybe that was the point. There is something in the second criminal's behavior that defies explanation. There is no good or readily apparent reason for it. And in the way that scripture works itself into our bones as we rehearse this grand story year after year, I heard, almost as an answer, the words that I have also been turning over in my mind this week. "Be still and know."

"Be still and know that I am God."

"Be still and know"

Not: understand that I am God, or prove that I am God, or explain that I am God.

Not: be still and verify that I am God.

"Be still and know."

"Be still and know that I am God."

Perhaps this was such a moment for the second criminal. He had this knowing that was strong enough to withstand that current of everything else happening around them. He had the vision of faith that allowed him to see Jesus in a way that apparently no one else could and to make this request: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

I wonder if you have ever had such a moment of knowing. A moment when the holiness and presence of God feels real in a way that you can't explain despite all the surrounding circumstances. A moment when your heart knows something that your head can't begin to comprehend.

I'm thinking back to August of 2020. You remember that time. A pandemic in full swing. A vaccine still months away. The death toll rising daily, and all of us cocooned in our little bubbles. Front line workers risking their health and their families daily.

And then there was the day in our family when Covid came home to my grandmother's house. Her illness followed the all-too-familiar trajectory. She was okay for a day or two, but then breathing became more difficult and she had to be hospitalized and intubated. No visitors allowed. Alone. And within a few days, the difficult news: she would not recover; she was dying.

The hospital chaplain coordinated with my mom and her siblings to set up a conference call. Instead of gathering at my grandmother's bedside, we gathered on the phone—me, my sister, my aunts and uncles and cousins. The chaplain put the phone on speaker in my grandmother's hospital room, and he stood outside the door and told us that we could go ahead and speak. One by one, we shared our love with my grandmother. This woman, a mother of five, a grandmother of seven, alone in a hospital room in her final moments. It should not have been like this. And yet that time that we shared with her on the phone, while in one way utterly inadequate, was in an even greater sense unquestionably holy. The presence and the peace of God were there. It didn't make sense. It defied explanation. But it was palpable.

"Be still and know that I am God."

I wonder if you have ever had such a moment. I've seen it in the faces of young people in this church traveling to Italy, Turkey, and Greece on our "Footsteps of Faith" trip, when our graduated high school seniors travel in the footsteps of Paul and the early church. I wasn't prepared for what

would happen when we entered the centuries-old cathedrals, the tears that would stream down the students' faces, and they couldn't even really describe why.

"Be still and know that I am God."

Perhaps you have had this knowing before, sitting in this space when you notice the vast open space above the chancel and how small we all are up here in comparison. Or maybe when the light streams through the windows, or when our voices reverberate together in song.

"Be still and know. Be still and know that I am God."

I wonder if you've had this knowing, gazing at the beauty and wonder of a child, or on a walk by yourself, or in the silence shared with a family member or a friend. Or maybe this knowing has whispered to you in a moment of deep pain, or loss, or confusion in your life.

"Be still and know that I am God."

This *knowing* may be the best explanation that we have for the second criminal's behavior. Somehow, he knew, he dared to believe, that the taunts and jeers hurled at Jesus might actually be true. "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And as they see one another, Jesus offers words of hope where it seemed there was no hope to be had: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

In Luke's gospel we find a strange king, a merciful king. He does not save himself but gives of himself, and in so doing overcomes hatred, sin, even death with love. This is the Christ who died and rose; this is the Christ who reigns.

In some circles this particular Sunday on the church calendar has gotten a bit of a bad reputation. The critiques have some merit. Some believe that the notion of a king or kingdom is antiquated. (In our context, that's certainly true.) Some worry that it's all very patriarchal. (Also true.) Others are concerned about using language that so intentionally adopts

and mimics imperial values and shows of strength.
(That's valid as well.)

But in a world of tyrants and cancer and natural disasters and pandemics and addiction and the idols of independence and self-sufficiency, it is powerful to say that Christ is king. It is a claim of resistance. It is a radical rejection of the kings and kingdoms of this world. It is a strident assertion of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed, the kingdom of God.

And so, in spite of all that is broken and hurting in our lives and in the world, this is our proclamation this day: Christ reigns. His reconciling love is at work in us and in this world. It brings hope to criminals on the cross and to people like you and me. It brings us the peace of God's presence in moments of quiet and joy. In moments of heartbreak in hospital rooms and every place where we might find ourselves at any moment. It gives us strength and courage to travel difficult journeys of head and heart and body and soul. And so, we spend our lives as people of faith telling this story, remembering this story, living this story, yearning for this story, and telling it again, time after time, because this is where it ends, and this is the good news that we proclaim again and again: Christ reigns.

Thanks be to God. Amen.